

The Provincial Cosmopolitan: Kipling, India and Globalization

In a review of 1897, W.B. Yeats heralded the dawn of a new movement in literature of which he felt sure Celtic cultural revival was to be the spearhead. The Victorian age, he pronounced, with its rationalism, naturalism and “vehement [...] gospels” was no more, and the pallbearers to convey it to its crusted mausoleum would be “passion”, “beauty”, “imagination” and “fairy-tale”. But to prove that these were indeed the stirrings of a general and not merely Irish sea-change in literature, he cited an up-and-coming contemporary from India who was evoking all these watchwords: “Mr Kipling, with his delight in the colour and spectacle of barbarous life [... is] but among the most obvious of the signs of change” (*Uncollected Prose*, Vol. II 42-43).

That the Irish nationalist should adopt the imperialist Kipling as an imaginative fellow traveller says something about how the question of the future of literature in the *fin-de-siècle* was increasingly a global one. The terms of his praise were echoed in a letter addressed to Kipling’s aunt in 1885 by a family friend. William Morris told Georgiana Burne-Jones that he wished to see “barbarism once more flooding the world, and real feeling and passions, however rudimentary, taking the place of our wretched hypocrisies” (Beckson xiv). Morris’s demand amounts to the reinvigoration of a powerful but culturally anodyne industrial metropole with what Simon During would call an transfusion of “subjective intensity” (401) from one of its overseas dependencies. This may have been an established literary mode, but in this period it responded not only to Western desire, but also to a needy anxiety. Though he held diametrically opposed views

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as to the political destiny of India, Yeats recognized in Kipling the urge to retrieve something from the imperial margins which will complement or remedy a Western metropolitan culture that appeared insufficient or even unsustainable.

Kipling's pursuit of harmony or fulfilment on the other side of the earth is particularly interesting, because in his travels around India he is very self-consciously discovering his own, native country. His status as a colonial hybrid, a citizen and circumnavigator of the empire, and a literary migrant from the colonies to the metropole greatly contributed to his meteoric rise to prominence in the 1890s. The cult of Kipling was fuelled by the autobiographical mythos surrounding his poems and stories, which appeared to necessitate for their prodigious author a constant inner translation between contemporary London and the world of his colonial childhood. Bombay, where Kipling spent the first five years of his life, was his imaginative refuge and zone of inspiration, elegized as a lost Eden in poems like "The Song of the Wise Children". In 1902 (eleven years after he had left India for the last time), this ghostly chorus of "native-born" orphans still kept up the poetic vow to fly home on the Monsoon winds:

We shall go back by the boltless doors,
To the life unaltered our childhood knew—
To the naked feet on the cool, dark floors,
And the high-ceiled rooms that the Trade blows through.

(Kipling, *Complete Verse* 73)

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Kipling was truly the product of a globalized world, born in a zone of transition, on the mercantile brink of India, and in a house cobbled-together in a hurry because the Parsi philanthropy that had drawn his father to Bombay had dried up in the huge cotton crash triggered by the end of the American Civil War. But if Kipling's life was intertwined with the forces of global change, we must also appreciate the deep internal tensions that these processes incited, and his wistful yearning for infantile return to lands of innocence and to "the life *unaltered*". Speaking to a sense of temporal dislocation familiar to Kipling's generation, this melancholic phrase is also akin to Housman's "land of lost content" or the pre-industrial innocence of Hardy's Wessex. Moreover, his singular ability to locate his own lost Eden in a tropical childhood indicates his altogether broader conception of the causes behind that late Victorian sense of disorientation. The attenuated, phantom quality of his nonetheless determined reverie suggests both the unfixed frailty of a life lived globally, as well as disillusionment with the imperial system that he regarded as providing stability in a globalized economy. It is the moral defeat of the Boer War that haunts the poem as much as the death of his first daughter (from pneumonia contracted on one of their frequent ocean voyages), and his own traumatic schooling in England.

This essay will explore Kipling's perception, gazing on the new century with foreboding, of the greater world transformations lamented by that phrase "the life *unaltered*", and his attempts to artistically resolve the dilemmas they posed for him. More specifically, the question I wish to answer is why those of his writings most global or imperial in their implications are so condensed and engrossed in the distinctive atmosphere of their narrow, particular ambit. Even "To the City of Bombay", a poem

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which celebrates the port where “world-end steamers wait” as one of the world’s mighty gateways is essentially parochial, framed as the weary mariner’s homecoming and re-embrace by the maternal.

The local and the global are as interlinked in Kipling as the vaunted “two / Separate sides of my head”, to whose ceaseless interaction he attributed his poetic inspiration (*Complete Verse* 478). Contrary yet complementary hemispheres, in one he is the Arab merchant he describes in a cunning foreword to his complete works (Kipling, *Two Forewords* 24-26), hauling the fictive spoils of empire back to the metropolitan exchange floor. In the other, he turns his back altogether on the “wretched hypocrisies” of western culture. My suggestion is this fluid interchange between provincial nativism and cosmopolitan internationalism enabled Kipling to comprehend and adapt to the forces of empire and commerce that had shaped and *altered* his own life, and were before his eyes radically reconfiguring the state of the world at large.

International Brotherhoods

Elleke Boehmer has described how the processes of what is today called globalization effectively began in the late nineteenth century, with free trade facilitated by colonial control of foreign markets (14). The young Kipling set out very deliberately to negotiate this world, simultaneously gathering politico-economic information and harvesting creative inspiration on his lengthy itineraries. Kipling’s travel writing exhibits a strong ethos of seeing things for oneself, rather than trusting to even the most up-to-date channels of mediated information, and he is characteristically a visual writer. Light, shadow, palette, tone—the painter’s workbox of his father Lockwood—are his

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descriptive watchwords. This appreciation for the specificity of a locale rebuffs the label of “cosmopolitanism”, which carried for Kipling a derogatory connotation of touristic superficiality.

As the great explainer of empire, however, the imperative also lay upon him to draw diverse territories into a common frame of reference. Boehmer goes on to describe how a literary motif of familiarity and brotherhood was devised for this interconnected world in the fin de siècle. It was a discourse shared not only by the champions of White Empire, moreover, but also by the allied interests of anti-colonialism in Ireland, India and South Africa (17-20). As he committed himself to an international world order, therefore, Kipling also became invested in the open exchange of associations and identities. But there is a further complexity: Kipling devotedly, even obsessively, retains a parochial base, which serves as his imaginative refuge and secluded zone of creative reverie. His vision of the global, in fact, is always undergirded by the local—each united in Bombay. A curious outcome of his overstated claim to an Indian patrimony is that, while his writings do fête the fraternity of Anglo-Saxons, they also repeatedly apply the discourse of brotherhood to native Indians.

These brothers are embraced not in the missionary sense of the Christian fold. Neither does Kipling allow the racialist platitudes of “Aryan brotherhood” ever to drip from his pen without facetious intent (*Letters I*, 92).¹ Instead, he ushers his reader into a historical myth of religious and social syncretism pre-dating the entrenched caste

¹ Once given the scholarly imprimatur of Max Müller, the notion that Britons and Indians shared a common racial origin became a well-rehearsed apology for the “civilizing mission” (Metcalf 1997: 81-82).

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divisions of the colonial period. “I met a hundred men on the road to Delhi and they were all my brothers”, is a so-called “native proverb” inscribed on the flyleaf of *Life’s Handicap*, a volume subtitled “being stories of mine own people”. Kipling often returns to the image of the wandering mendicant or holy-man who, by abandoning the privileges of caste, has attained a peripatetic unity with all. Predating the Lama of *Kim*, “A Song of Kabir” idealizes the picaresque vagabondage of the medieval poet-saint who was venerated by Hindus and Muslims alike:

To learn and discern of his brother the clod,
Of his brother the brute, and his brother the God,
He has gone from the council and put on the shroud.
 (“Can ye hear?” saith Kabir), a *bairagi* avowed! (*Complete Verse* 410)

This discourse probably partakes of the mystic fraternity of the Masonic tradition, which Kipling (*Something of Myself* 29) joined in India and within which he claimed to have interacted on egalitarian terms with Hindus, Muslims and working-class British soldiers. However, like Freemasonry itself, this apparently transgressive encounter in fact reinforces the colonial system.² The poetic—more specifically the balladic—world is where songs of cultural mutuality and moral egalitarianism drown out the call for political redress. It is important for Kipling to effect a reconciliation with the radical difference of India while simultaneously insisting on that difference—for India to be

² For a more thorough examination of the social dynamics of the Craft in colonial India, see Harland-Jacobs (2007: 4-7)

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familiar and yet remain ultimately unfathomable. Evidently the establishment and penetration of cultural partitions demonstrates Kipling's complex intuitive grasp of patterns of colonial control, but this creative experimentation with his own identity serves a purpose beyond India: it furthers his ambition to be a global author.

The Indian affiliation, for Kipling, actually underpinned the imperial identity. He was entitled to be the bard of empire and roam its railways and sea-lanes under the patronage of Cecil Rhodes, not because he was an Englishman of unimpeachable "whiteness", but because he could claim to "know the ground" and had felt the soil under his fingernails. It should not be underestimated how emotive and motivating the politics of identity are for Kipling, though this becomes increasingly apparent in the pained and bitter remarks he passed on Indian nationalist politics towards the end of his life. It underlies his particular hostility towards Gandhi, whom he chose to denounce always on grounds of *authenticity*; the saintly persona, he implied, was a fraudulent and cynical ploy masking the political acumen of a cunning Middle Temple lawyer. At one dinner party in the 1930s, Kipling responded to the question of whether Gandhi was "sincere" by declaring that the Mahatma's seductive act was just "a paste-board front" (Birkenhead 340). Evidently, the underlying conviction was that only he, the would-be white Kabir, was sincerely committed to his populist identity.

This antagonism is instructive, because Gandhi, as an inspirational grassroots figure, in many ways replicates and supersedes Kipling's Anglo-Indian emblems of cultural syncretism. Gandhi, too, adopted the egalitarian role of the holy mendicant, attaining an iconic status by leading a diversity of followers on meandering, pilgrimage-like marches that—once publicized through news media—became a visual statement of

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his credo “all men are brothers”. Moreover, even as he committed himself to this role, he continued to shuffle Western and Eastern identities with an energetic affinity that, for the aging Kipling, became untenable. Versatile and cosmopolitan, one of the Mahatma’s most startling media coups was his fêting by Lancashire millworkers in 1931, while Kipling sniped from the side-lines. The latter’s only response, by this point, was to insinuate that, like the manneristic speech of an overeducated babu, Gandhi’s nationalist discourse was “Brahminee [...] *plus* Balliol”—that is, a polluted amalgam of Western political science and popular spirituality (*Letters* V, 574). Its originators were the Theosophist colonial officers who had founded the Indian National Congress 1885, to whom I shall return later.

Kipling’s identification of Western cultural influence with corruption and inauthenticity is a significant development in his mentality, and Gandhi was present also at its inception. A close contemporary, the young barrister had already been a year at his studies in London when Kipling arrived in 1889. As with the future Mahatma, an important stage in the young writer’s formation of an identity both cosmopolitan and provincial was the struggle to safeguard his Indian heritage against amalgamation with the faceless metropolis. Gandhi shielded himself from the lures of meat and alcohol, but Kipling made a more complete gesture of refusal in the final stanza of “In Partibus”, where he dismisses the entirety of the “vile” and distressingly foreign city with a Hindi word:

The buses run to Islington,

To Highgate and Soho...

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But I can only murmur 'Bus!' [enough]

From Shepherd's Bush to Bow. (Early Verse 472)

This rapid retreat into Kipling's India-born identity marks a jarring experience that shook his developing vision of the Empire as a mutually-comprehensible world-culture. Seven months' travel through East Asia and North America en-route to London had begun to animate his perception of the Empire as an expansive, globalizing influence—an influence which, as I will discuss shortly, he understood primarily not in economic but in cultural terms. He recognized now, however, an obstacle to his objectives, something degenerating and fundamentally unimaginative that presaged a crisis in the making. If Kipling was not alone in construing at this time, in London, a distinctive modern malaise, in his mind this ill wind took on characteristically global dimensions. It presented a conflict between metropole and colony that, going beyond the immediate maintenance of British control in India, held in effect the highest stakes for Kipling's politics and poetic.

Confronting the West

To Kipling, London was a place of fog and faceless uniformity, peopled by “savages living in black houses and ignorant of everything beyond the Channel” (Lycett 269-70). Most of “In Partibus” consists in listing the jumbled names of districts to which the author can attach no memory or association, in marked contrast to haunts such as Wazir Khan's mosque or the Taksali Gate which, in Kipling's Lahore writings, are almost characters in their own right. Kipling fictionally mapped Lahore, his home for five years,

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in terms of history, tradition and established communities. Lacking such meaningful geography, London was an inscrutable sprawl shaped, not by aggregation, but by deforming forces.

The metropolitan sophistication he had yearningly imagined while mired in upcountry India had now assumed a distressingly alien aspect. Moreover, he began to figure Britain itself as the frozen and abject periphery of civilization, a provincialization echoed by “The Song of the Wise Children” as well as “To the City of Bombay”, in which Kipling thanks God that his birth “Fell not in isles aside— / Waste headlands of the earth” (*Complete Verse* 143). Kipling was adept at evoking the anxieties of decline besetting a fatigued superpower, the imperial hub spinning off its axis as old centralities and old certainties fragment. Such imagery also indicates an intuition, as the “yellow fog” and “fiendish darkness” enveloped his chambers at Charing Cross, that his disoriented vertigo was not specific to him or to London (*Letters I*, 361). His descriptions of the inchoate city sustained by bedraggled technology, where fragmentary vignettes of vice are glimpsed in islands of sickly gaslight, begin to identify it as the source of a malign and spreading influence. His subsequent marginalization of the city is an attempt to resist and banish this influence from the India that he increasingly cherished both as a zone of maternal origin and arena for fraternal affiliation.

Marxist theorists have argued that emergent patterns of literary modernism spatially register—in, for example, the grey homogeneity of metalled roads bearing ever-accelerating motor traffic—the expansion of global capital and its agent, imperialism.³

³ See Fredric Jameson’s (1990: 56) eloquent commentary on Forster’s descriptions of the Great North Road in *Howards End*.

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Applying their critique to Kipling throws up interesting problems, because while he was inclined to distrust the ethical and political irresponsibility of naked commerce, he retained the hope that the bureaucratic preponderance of the colonial state would act not as capitalism's facilitator, but as a curb to its unregulated excesses. Hence his poetry strives to promote a benevolent globalism in which all men are mutually-dependent brothers, in place of a corrupting global market through which all become mutually-alienated free agents.

Roland Robertson has described globalization as a concept which "refers both to the compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole" (8). Kipling experienced both these phenomena on the circuitous route that brought him to London in 1889. Calls at Singapore and Hong Kong impressed him with the massive reach of British military and commercial influence, while an inland tour from Nagasaki unveiled the ritual and decorum of "traditional" Japanese life. The collision of these two worlds, however, evoked mixed feelings. Preparing to embark at Yokohama, he received an apparition of his own fame: pirate copies of *Plain Tales from the Hills*, imported for the numerous American missionaries and soldiers whom he crossly found dominating the San Francisco steamer. These men were to reappear three years later, after his London exile, in a poem which meditates on the collision of two great vehicles of connectivity: Buddhism and imperialism. He describes gazing on the great statue of Buddha at Kamakura:

Till drowsy eyelids seem to see

A-flower 'neath her golden *htee*

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The Shwe-Dagon flare easterly

From Burma to Kamakura.

And down the loaded air there comes

The thunder of Thibetan drums

And droned—“*Om mane padme hum 's*”

A world's-width from Kamakura.

Yet Brahmans rule Benares still,

Buddh-Gaya's ruins pit the hill

And beef-fed zealots threaten ill

To Buddha and Kamakura.

A tourist-show, a legend told,

A rusting bulk of bronze and gold,

So much, and scarce so much, ye hold

The meaning of Kamakura? (*Complete Verse 75-6*)

The resonance and symbolism of the monument appear to be dissipating in a world that has been mysteriously sundered from its past, and where once-strong channels of cultural exchange have been fractured and superseded. Unlike Conrad, Kipling never explicitly correlates European global power with the ominous premonitions that Yeats (*Essays and Introductions* 162) labelled “the slow dying of men's hearts that we call the

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progress of the world”. Nonetheless, embedded in much of his writing is an awkward disjunction between India, his mythic native soil and imaginative refuge, and the trains, ships, zeppelins and submarine cables that also populate his fictive world. Endowing modernity with a sublime and sinister romance, he uses the latter two as awesome emblems of interconnection in the poem “The Deep-Sea Cables” (which whisper “Let us be one!”) and the science-fiction story “With the Night Mail” (in which the world is governed by a kind of omnipotent World Trade Organization). In both cases Kipling’s disquiet is again registered spatially—the cables, traversing “great grey level plains of ooze” (*Complete Verse* 138), and mail-zeppelin exist in a mid-Atlantic nowhere. But the disjunction is also temporal. Set in 2000 A.D., “With the Night Mail” (*Actions and Reactions* 109-169) imagines a technological zenith that effectively marks the end of history, a consummation described more apocalyptically in “The Deep-Sea Cables” as men’s murder of “their father Time”. Kipling’s most sustained meditation on the radical compression of space and of our “time-conception” appeared in a speech made to the Royal Geographical Society in 1914 on the coming revolution in air travel (*Writings on Writing* 78): “Month by month the earth shrinks actually, and, what is more important, in imagination. We know it by the slide and crash of unstable material all around us”.

Often accused of a narrow and unreflective outlook, Kipling was in fact constantly dramatizing his own inherent dualities. With humour and subtle pathos, he sets the sunburnt and ignorant drummer-boy to keep guard over Kim en-route to his schooling at St Xavier’s, mocking his charge’s sing-song bazaar English but eyeing with resentful suspicion his lively Pashto conversations with Mahbub Ali. Disarmed by the Irish boy’s

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flattering curiosity, he cannot even grasp his humiliation as he later describes to a disbelieving and contemptuous Kim “the Liverpool suburb which was his England” (Kipling, *Kim* 151). The desultory conversation marks a silent victory for one model of cultural syncretism over another. Uniformed, homogeneous and projecting a blunt and universal power, the sluggish wits of drummer-boys are no match for Kim’s fluid identity and independent loyalties. Although their meeting takes place in a barracks, the drummer-boy will never enjoy even the institutional fraternity with Kim that Kim does with his multicultural schoolmates, or with the syndicate of spies known as the *Sat Bhai* (seven brothers).

Spatially, the two boys rehearse the conflict over which so much of Kipling’s work is poised: the antagonism between a particular, local refuge in Bombay or Lahore, grounded in memory and experience, and the imperial infinity through which the drummer-boy telescopes his diminishing life, “the bad opposite of place” (Jameson 56). India presents both possibilities to the British eye: on one side, the sunlit reality of the Grand Trunk Road in *Kim*, on the other, the foggy unreality of dusty troop-trains that rattle through Lord Dufferin’s mind in the dramatic monologue “One Viceroy Resigns” (Kipling, *Complete Verse* 59). India is a space that disenchants Western civilization, unravels the bunting from its brassy idols and empties them of meaning. Ultimately, for Kipling, rational and systematized global dominion must hold sway. But as it proceeds on its triumphal march, he obliges imperialism to take a zig-zag route and suffer its little bafflements and defeats. India must seem to resist the encroachments of beef-fed zealots of one persuasion or another.

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Shifty confrontations between Eastern dexterity and Western inertia were a preferred trope, first honed in the brazen satires Kipling wrote for conservative Anglo-Indian newspapers. Poems like the “The Masque of Plenty”, an early satire on government agricultural policy, presented as a contest of voices, shipwreck the reformist schemes of Whitehall mandarins upon the hard rock of local conditions. The complacent melody of central bureaucracy drowns out the plaintive tones of the neglected farmers, before it is silenced by “the chorus of the crystallized facts”:

Before the beginning of years
There came to the rule of the State
Men with a pair of shears,
Men with an Estimate—

Kipling proceeds to name various progressive viceroys and modernizing educators, before shrewdly portraying the alien and unreal dispensation which they have “fashioned with pens and paper” and superimposed over the historic face of Indian society in the person of “the Much Administered Man”:

In the towns of the North and the East,
They gathered us unto rule,
They bade him starve his priest
And send his children to school.
Railways and roads they wrought,
For the needs of the soil within;

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A time to squabble in court,
A time to bear and to grin.
And gave him peace in his ways,
Jails—and Police to fight,
Justice—at length of days,
And Right—and Might in the Right. (*Complete Verse* 30-31)

Kipling potently evokes the weird disorientation of colonial government, his sly backhands at objects of British self-congratulation landing like grim swipes of the hoe. The satire, however, applies only to the meddling liberal policies which he despised—not so much because they imperilled British control by disturbing established economic and social structures, but because they undermined India’s unique particulars. They assumed the emergence of a world where once radically different countries became equivocal and interchangeable, where utilitarian government might be applied as well in Jamaica as in Punjab.

Having scuppered the liberal brotherhood of man in his early satires, however, Kipling offers in his romantic fictions and “border ballads” the brotherhood of Strong Men. This is the canon of fables he tells about love, war, revenge—Morris’s “barbarian emotions”—but also personal justice, magic spells, metamorphoses and pilgrimages in a pre-modern India or those parts of colonial India where modernity has not reached. In the preface to one of these volumes Kipling claims that:

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These tales have been collected from all places, and all sorts of people, from priests in the Chubára, from Ala Yar the carver, Jiwun Singh the carpenter, nameless men on steamers and trains round the world... (*Life's Handicap* xiv)

Note how Kipling's Indian, provincial informants are identified by name and caste, whereas his worldly, wayfaring sources are anonymous and of unremembered provenance. India appeals not only as a society of storytellers, but as a bastion of particularity and of reassuringly hard reality—reassuring primarily because these many strange lives are seen to cohere into a seamless whole. The country, which so many colonial overseers possessively denoted “real”, offers a solution to the anxieties of both modernity and imperialism.⁴ As Boehmer has written, in Kipling's masterpiece *Kim* India is treated as a vast textuality, in which the colonial grid of railways and police stations is interpenetrated by a resilient Indian culture (21-2). The lama talks at “railway speed” within a carriage where castes and religions mix not merely because they are impelled by wise British governance. They seem, instead, to have introduced to it a residual tradition of syncretism and co-habitation and to have distinctively Indianized railway travel. This is the surreptitious hegemony that Kipling devises for both India and England, persuading us that his vision is our tradition, and that universal truths will not be imposed but will naturally emerge from the diversity of our own experience.

On the global scale, this apparent permeation and supersession by the colonized in fact strengthens the imperial project. The brotherhood of *bairagis* undergirds the fraternity of empire—for Kipling, the loss of India would mean the shattering of that

⁴ As in “the real India”. See for example Rees (1908)

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composite imperial identity, and a drastic relegation of England to a meaningless, caricature existence. But what is it exactly that Kipling retrieves from India, and how does it fulfil Europe's sense of being? Kipling's India is partly the medieval vision of Europe cherished by his father's Pre-Raphaelite friends, or Yeats's imagined Japan: a world where our subjective and mutually alienated existences are comprehensible through common ritual and tradition—a place where connection (Forster's forlorn hope for the 20th Century) is taken for granted. It is also comparable to the "aesthetics of diversity" heralded by his contemporary, Victor Segalen, known at one time as "*le Kipling français*", and a writer more explicitly aware of the implications that projects like the Panama Canal held for the propagation of a global monoculture (Forsdick 52). Like Segalen's work, Kipling's militates against conventional Orientalist accounts of the East because it is not a static, frieze-like vision, but is constantly evolving. Kipling may know the ground, but he is not grounded. His presence, and the reader's presence in the space of his fictions, floats ever so slightly above the surface. As Montefiore writes, Kipling makes Indian culture seem magically accessible to foreign readers, but to experience this is a process of initiation (36). Kipling first challenges and erodes his initiate's jaded preconceptions before reconstituting them. He de-familiarizes the *fin-de-siècle* India known through advertising and stereotype before re-inducting his readers into a new, secret knowledge of Asia, and thence a knowledge of the whole world.

The process does not end there. Remaining playful, he explores a persistent dialectic between romance and reality, inventing "true tales" that give the lie to metropolitan existence's disjointed illusions, before undermining these resolute visions with callous cynicism. Once again, Kipling's creativity springs directly from

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contradiction. India is the imaginative space where, for example, he can romanticize noble bloodshed in 18th century Afghanistan—“Four things greater than all things are, - / Women and Horses and Power and War!” (*Complete Verse* 197)—before exposing the miserable arithmetic of sniper attrition in modern border stations: “The flying bullet down the Pass, / That whistles clear: “All flesh is grass”. (*Complete Verse* 36)

Kipling’s oscillation between romance and reality leads to a literature where the former becomes the natural counterpart of the latter. To return to the Buddha at Kamakura, India for Kipling is not just a factory of romances, but an engine of meanings. By reconciling local particularity with global homogeneity in the colonies, he seeks to restore history and stability, not just to Kamakura, but to the beleaguered European mind-set. If the inter-merging of the world threatens to fragment and marginalize that which is established and central, India remains a land inhabited by (to borrow one of his titles) “a diversity of creatures” that exist in aesthetic harmony. Not for Kipling a nebulous and relativistic literature in which descriptive language loses its hold upon the objective world: in his India, everything can be signified and everything possesses significance. The world, in spite of the gloomy prognosis, is once more rendered meaningful.

At the height of confidence in his own comprehensive imagination, vision and language exist for Kipling on balanced sides of an unproblematic equation, and the role of the author, like a secular evangel, is to generously illuminate this fundamental relationship through the clear glass of penetrating prose. As in his political discourse, when Kipling defined—jointly—the artist’s responsibilities to art and to society, he frequently reached for liturgical diction and the pious, public craft of the medieval mason. Art aspires not to a human but a divine standard of excellence, and hence the true

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master “paints the world as he sees it for the God of things as they are” (*Complete Verse* 181). These quasi-religious apologies for art might offer a clue as to why Kipling’s most devoted readers took to his often intensely memorable poems and phrases as a sort of creed for daily life, and also why that worldwide readership assumed the mentality of a club or confraternity. Drawing no distinction between the role of the verbal and the visual artist, he articulates their ability to reveal unimagined mutuality in our perceptions of the world, in terms both of sacred duty and of the brotherhood of “the Craft”. In one of his last poems, “Chartres Windows”, Kipling (*Complete Verse* 665) describes light falling inside the cathedral “on the pavement where all feet have trod” through a cosmos of glass that “Blazons what each man dreamed no other knew”.

Unity in Diversity

As with most of the mottoes and epigraphs attributed by Kipling to the Punjabi proverbial idiom, we are bound to assume that “I met a hundred men on the road to Delhi...” is, at most, only loosely derived from a “native proverb”. However, that has not prevented the phrase from acquiring a vigorous life of its own. Any casual internet search will throw up multiple pages attributing this colonial vignette to perennial Indian wisdom. Perhaps the process began when Arnold Bennett purloined the adage for the conclusion to his 1911 self-help tract *Mental Efficiency*. “Yes, and they were all my twin brothers, if I may so express it”, rejoins Bennett, as a prelude to his own pantheistic gloss: “the same essential force that is *me* is also *you*” (126).

Nothing could better epitomise the infectious persuasiveness of Kipling’s fictions. To offer a Masonic handshake to all who tread the open, broad, dusty expanse of the

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Grand Trunk Road—and to parley with the colloquial zest and relish promised by “native proverb”—is to ingeniously pre-empt the great levelling menaced by the alienating forces of global capital. Hence Kipling posits the cultural “soft power” of India against the hard abrasive edge of economic deracination. Of course, the critical eye can detect where the strings are attached which balance Kipling’s teetering antinomies of romance and realism, the subjective and the collective, the parochial and the ecumenical. The first step to deconstructing his fantasies of contact is to point out how fleetingly *modern* they are, for they are only realised in motion on roads, railway trains and “abaft the funnel” on the high seas. It was both the mission and the burden—to borrow his own moralistic word—of this provincial cosmopolitan to remain intermittently en-route for the whole prolific first half of his career.

But Kipling’s defeat by his own self-contradictions should not be interpreted merely as the thwarted hegemony of an imperial diehard. Engagingly earnest, because they animate unresolved personal conflicts, his aphorisms, balladry and panoramic fictive vision markedly contributed to the contemporary debates that drew together both imperial and anti-imperial elements around the question of what a world culture might look like. To conclude with another counterfactual example, it is telling to observe Kipling’s discursive influence within an anti-colonial movement that significantly contributed to Gandhi’s catholic syncretism and to the Indian nationalist ideal of “unity in diversity”. It is the same movement out of which Bennett is pedantically conning his spiritual universalism: Theosophy, a religious phenomenon which both Rudyard and Lockwood Kipling in fact scornfully ridiculed. With its transcontinental membership and unabashed splicing of Buddhist, Hindu and Christian philosophy, the Theosophical Society was

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itself a potent product of globalization, and simultaneously a riposte to its anticipated depredations. For the movement's sometime leader—and vocal Indian nationalist—Annie Besant, unfurling the broad canvas of the world in a style reminiscent of Kipling was a necessary prologue to Theosophy's composite doctrine. "The essence of Religion is this recognition of God everywhere [...] In the stability of mountains, in the might of crashing billows [...] in the star-strewn depths of space, in the wide stretchings of deserts, he sees His Immensity" (68).

Preaching the unity of all faiths and the intermingling of individual consciousnesses, Theosophy was effectively a religious explanation for the economic disorientations of a globalizing world. It was also a programme for utilitarian reform, social uplift, and Victorian self-help in colonial South Asia, and inasmuch as it weds civilizing modernity to the western presence in India, it is a doctrine which, by partaking of the Other, reassures its devotees that they are not at risk of eroding the diversity and particularity of India. As an anticolonial subculture connecting occult radicals in various awakening nations, its adherents in Dublin furnished the young Yeats with his seminal introduction to the mystical. The movement and its submerged networks did not escape Kipling's mockery and suspicion, and yet the impact esoteric religion made upon Yeats was fundamentally Kiplingian. A powerfully *visionary* experience, *Kim* too—in its most meditative and scripturally resonant passages—seeks to facilitate an encounter with "immeasurable strangeness", illuminated by evanescent flashes of familiarity.⁵ The

⁵ "Immeasurable strangeness" was how Yeats (1913: xvii) described his first impressions of Rabindranath Tagore's poetry.

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epigraph to chapter fourteen is another Masonic fragment passed off as a mantra of
Kabir:

My brother kneels (so saith Kabir)
 To stone and brass in heathen-wise,
But in my brother's voice I hear
 My own unanswered agonies.
His God is as his Fates assign—
His prayer is all the world's—and mine. (*Kim* 300)

If worldwide Theosophy indirectly disseminated Kipling's vision of India, then *Kim* in particular must be appreciated in its extended, global ambit. For as much as its goal is to understand India and translate its complexities for a Western readership, it is also an attempt to make sense of an Empire in change. In "The Sestina of the Tramp-Royal" (*Complete Verse* 72), one of Kipling's soldierly voices declares that "it's like a book, I think, this bloomin' world, / which you can read and care for". Kipling composed these lines in 1896, at a time when he was still polishing, by stages, the gemlike form of his magnum opus. Then in its early drafts, *Kim* was the closest analogue Kipling could provide for this revelatory experience of reality. His "little friend of all the world" is also the ideal, polyglot reader of that world. Kim solves each problem with which his quest confronts him by using his ingenuity, dissimulation or daring. Before these talents come into play, however, it is his interpretative acuity, honed by the mental trials of Lurgan Sahib, that enables him to analyse the situation and penetrate all false fronts. This ability

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to decode and synthesize fragmentary encounters with the foreign, prompted by a habitual curiosity, appealed equally to imperialists and anti-imperialists troubled by globalized *anomie*—to both the liberal (and co-gendered) fellowship of Theosophists and the more regimented, explicitly masculine fraternity of the worldwide Scouting movement, whose membership took *Kim* as an aesthetic primer for their founder's maxim "look wider". Just as these syncretic brotherhoods both mediated and disseminated global modernity while seeking to stem its dissociative and deracinating aspects, so they posited the "immeasurable strangeness" of India or ineffable "Immensity" of divine Creation as modes of *perception* resistant to the grey infinitude of an instrumental monoculture.

In this respect, *Kim* is formally and intrinsically different from Kipling's prior Indian fiction, because the novel emerged from a dramatically altered method of composition. Agile by-products of his newspaper duties, early stories like "On the City Wall" were journalistic in the best sense: precipitate, impressionistic forays into the urban conundrum of Lahore and urbane confection of Simla. *Kim* was a work of slow gestation and reflection, lingering not on shady backstreets but on an unclouded pastoral, and moulded to uncanny perfection by the memory of a nostalgic exile. It was an effort to conjure anew the country he had physically forsaken for the last time in 1891—an effort exerted over a distance of time and space, and addressed to a beguiled international readership rather than a knowing Anglo-Indian coterie.

Like Kipling himself, *Kim* was also the product of globalized, interconnected markets. Indeed, it could only come to fruition once transoceanic distance had been imposed—the first of many diasporic Indian novels in the twentieth century. This irony foregrounds its other great paradox: although it is a work of fantasy narrated through the

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tightly controlled structure of a picaresque romance, it remains more *convincing* at a fundamental level than any of Kipling's more realist fiction. A triumph of illusion, it is nonetheless his most ringing validation of Matthew Arnold's dictum to "see the object as in itself it really is" (a criterion central to Lockwood Kipling's artistic generation). Kim and his companion the Lama both proceed on their adventures with the conviction that their perceptions of India—social and spiritual, respectively—are objectively true. The consummation of their mutual devotion is marked, therefore, by the interpenetration and melding of their worldviews. "I saw every camp and village in India", declares the Lama as he recovers from his swooning trance, and "I saw them at one time and in one place; for they were within the Soul". In his devotion to Kim, however, he forsook this transcendence for his earthly, particular attachments: "I pushed aside world upon world for thy sake" (*Kim* 337-338).

The brotherhood of the road then, of vagabonds, of the "Craft", is ultimately the community of seers—a community that generously embraces, through this most associative brand of literature, a vast readership. In the years after its publication, the novel's following included figures as diverse as the French soldier who posted his own cherished pocket copy to Kipling—still embedded with a German bullet (Lycett 684)—and Jawaharlal Nehru, the Indian leader most exercised with positioning India within the globalized world while retaining its cultural integrity, its age-old "dream of unity" (Nehru, *Discovery* 55). He fondly remembered being introduced to the novel as a boy, appropriately enough, by his Theosophist tutor (Nehru, *Autobiography* 14). *Kim*, the product of globalization, is also adopted therefore as the solution to its challenges. If any

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one country may absorb a whole empire, this is it. Kipling's India is a place that
possesses a monopoly on reality, and all else is phantasm.